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Title: "Like a wail from the tomb, / But of world-waking power": James Clarence Mangan's "A Vision: A. D. 1848", The Great Famine and the Young Ireland Rising'.

Date: 2007

Originally published in: 1848: The year the world turned?

Example citation: Fegan, M. (2007). "Like a wail from the tomb, / But of world-waking power": James Clarence Mangan's "A Vision: A. D. 1848", The Great Famine and the Young Ireland Rising'. In K. Boardman, & C. Kinealy (Eds.), *1848: The year the world turned?* (pp. 210-224). Newcastle, United Kingdom: Cambridge Scholars.

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Available at: <http://hdl.handle.net/10034/344444>

“Like a wail from the tomb, / But of world-waking power”: James Clarence Mangan’s

“A Vision: A. D. 1848”, the Great Famine, and the Young Ireland Rising

On 1 January 1848, the *Nation*, the leading Dublin nationalist newspaper, reviewed the horrors of 1847, the second full year of the Great Famine, which was to kill more than a million people. The *Nation* spoke of “massacres”, “the temporary prostration of the Irish people before its executioner, like a victim on the scaffold”, and the Coercion Bill. The one bright light, it continued, had been the growth of national feeling, both among the higher classes, and among Young Irelanders, who had broken away from O’Connell’s Repeal movement and founded the Irish Confederation (9). The article was accompanied by a poem, “A Voice of Encouragement: A New Year’s Lay”, by one of the *Nation*’s stalwarts, James Clarence Mangan. It would be difficult to imagine a less encouraging poem, or indeed one less like a lay. The second stanza outlines the horrors of the present:

Friends! the gloom in the land, in our once bright land, grows deeper.
Suffering, even to Death in its horriblest form, aboundeth;
Through our black harvestless fields the peasant’s faint wail resoundeth.
Hark to it even now!... The nightmare-oppressed sleeper
Gasping and struggling for life beneath his hideous best rider,
Seeth not, dreeth not, sight or terror more fearful or ghastly
Than that poor paralysed slave! (Mangan: 1999, 17, ll. 9-15)

Even so, things are about to get worse; the Trustful and Firm, Sage and Saintly, Patriots, Orators and Prophets of Ireland have lost faith, and sunk into degradation and abasement. Denied progress by centuries of colonization, the Irish are in fact degenerating:

Slavery debases the soul, yea reverses its primal nature.

Long were our fathers bowed to the earth by fetters of iron –

And, alas! WE inherit the failings and ills that environ

Slaves like a dungeon-wall, and dwarf their natural stature. (ll. 49-52)

The speaker calls on his compatriots to reverse the backward slide: “Follow your destiny up!” (l. 41) By working, writing and preaching they can redeem their countrymen. But the final stanza is ominous and apocalyptic:

Omen-full, arched with gloom, and laden with many a presage,

Many a portent of woe, looms the Impending Era.

Not, as of old, by Comet-sword, Gorgon, or ghastly Chimera,

Scarcely by Lightning and Thunder, Heaven to-day sends its message.

Into the secret heart – down through the caves of the spirit,

Pierces the silent Shaft – sinks the invisible Token –

Cloaked in the Hall the Envoy stands, his mission unspoken,

While the pale banquetless guests await in trembling to hear it. (ll. 65-72)

In many ways “A Voice of Encouragement” is typical of Mangan’s poems of exhortation in the *Nation*. He rarely foresees success for his friends and compatriots; instead, they must be prepared to fulfil their predestined role as sacrificial victims to pave the way for possible success in a future generation of Irish nationalists. In “The Warning Voice”, published in the *Nation* in February 1846, he forecasts a coming era of Knowledge and Peace, but warns the present generation:

On *you* its beams glow not –

For *you* its flowers blow not!

You cannot rejoice in its light,

But in darkness and suffering instead

You go down to the place of the Dead!
 To *this* generation,
 The stormy commotion,
 And foam of the Popular Ocean,
 The struggle of class against class;
 The Dearth and the Sadness,
 The Sword and the War-vest;
 To the *next*, the Repose and the Gladness,
 “The sea of clear glass,”

And the rich Golden Harvest! (Mangan: 1997, 134, ll. 61-75)

The next generation will achieve the “sea of clear glass” of the Book of Revelation:
 “and I saw as it were a sea of glass mingled with fire: and them that had gotten the
 victory over the beast, and over his image, and over his mark, and over the number of
 his name, stand on the sea of glass” (Rev. 15:2). But this generation must accept
 merely the “foam of the Popular Ocean”, do their duty and die.

“A Voice of Encouragement” also acknowledges Mangan’s own position on
 the periphery of the struggle for liberty. In the first stanza he admits his unfitness for
 the role of rebel:

You, young men, would a man unworthy to rank in your number,
 Yet with a heart that bleeds for his country’s wrongs and affliction,
 Fain raise a Voice to in Song, albeit his music and diction
 Rather be fitted, alas! to lull to, than startle from, slumber. (ll. 5-8)

His desire to play a part, and very real sense of pain at the horrors he had witnessed
 over the years of famine, are balanced against the realisation that the “young men” of
 Young Ireland outrank him. In the autobiographical “The Nameless One”, published

posthumously but written in 1848, Mangan describes himself as “Old and hoary / At thirty-nine” (Mangan, 1999, 224, ll. 49-50); he was in fact 45, reflecting his consistent excision of 6 years from his age. Three years earlier he wrote to James McGlashan, editor of the *Dublin University Magazine*: “I suppose, *en passant*, that you imagine me an old man. I am 36 years of age in point of time” (Mangan, 2002b, 277). Mangan’s biographer, Ellen Shannon-Mangan, has argued that the loss of six years from his age was due to a suppressed childhood trauma (12), but it is clearly also related to the uncomfortable proximity of the virile youths of Young Ireland. His own physical weakness is often foregrounded in poems in which he calls on the Youth of Ireland to rise: in “For Soul and Country”, published in 1849, he cries:

My countrymen! my words are weak,

My health is gone, my soul is dark,

My heart is chill – (Mangan: 1999, 123, ll. 49-51).

Any role he could play was going to be limited.

Mangan knew he was an unlikely rebel. While some of his earliest poems were published in the *Comet*, founded as part of the nationalist anti-tithe campaign, this was in part a matter of necessity, given how few publishing opportunities were available, and Mangan’s contributions tended to be comic charades and enigmas. In the 1830s and 1840s he worked for some of the bastions of the Union in Ireland: the *Dublin University Magazine*, Trinity College Dublin, and the Ordnance Survey. In 1832 the 29-year-old Mangan wrote a long letter to his friend Tynan, meditating on his political apathy:

[M]y conclusion is this: that political liberty is not worth a bag of chaff. [...] If I were to-morrow to enter into possession of all the advantages that the best of good governments have been able to bestow, I would feel precisely as an

individual would, who, suffering under a complication of maladies, gout, palsy, stone, phthisis, scrofula, cancer, dropsy, cholic, catarrh, epilepsy, erysipelas, &c. &c. should find himself one morning freed from a little wen upon his thumb. [...] I should myself like a revolution better than you think, especially if it produced a general transfer of property and I had any prospect of robbing somebody, for my finances are too low for my ideas, which are of the princeliest. A revolution, besides, creates an extensive hubbub, a thing I am occasionally partial to, and exceedingly so whenever I see any likelihood of making anything by it. (Mangan: 2002b, 246-8)

At this stage he can see nothing altruistic in revolution; it is merely another form of self-absorption: “I think the man who labours to earn the price of a pair of boots for himself proportionably entitled to as many encomiums as the man who kills other people that he may procure freedom for himself. Depend upon it that Self is at the bottom of every struggle” (245). In 1840 he wrote to Charles Gavan Duffy, then editor of the Belfast *Vindicator*, later editor of *The Nation* and one of the leaders of Young Ireland: “Don’t ask me for political articles just now. I have had no experience in that *genre d’écrire* and I should infallibly blunder” (258). Duffy later commented: “At this time he knew nothing of politics and cared nothing for them, and he averted his eyes from Irish history as from a painful and humiliating spectacle” (“Personal Memories” 286).

If Mangan was clear about his lack of credentials for rebel status, so were his friends and colleagues. The son of a failed grocer, Mangan was forced to leave school at 15 in order to support his parents and brothers by working as a clerk; he was a prodigious auto-didact, but did not share the social backgrounds of the Young Irishmen, many of whom were lawyers and doctors moonlighting as poets and

journalists. Mangan was also an eccentric figure. Duffy recalled: “When he emerged into daylight, he was dressed in a blue cloak, midsummer or midwinter, and a hat of fantastic shape, under which golden hair, as fine and silky as a woman’s, hung in unkempt tangles, and deep blue eyes lighted a face as colourless as parchment. He looked like the spectre of some German romance rather than a living creature” (“Personal Memories” 278). John Mitchel, who worked alongside Duffy in *The Nation*, before seceding to found the *United Irishman*, described his first encounter with Mangan in Trinity College Library:

It was an unearthly and ghostly figure, in a brown garment; the same garment (to all appearance) which lasted till the day of his death. The blanched hair was totally unkempt; the corpse-like features still as marble; a large book was in his arms, and all his soul was in the book. I had never heard of Clarence Mangan before, and knew not for what he was celebrated; whether as a magician, a poet, or a murderer; yet took a volume and spread it on a table, not to read, but with pretence of reading to gaze on the spectral creature upon the ladder. (xxxiv-xxxv)

Added to his weird appearance was his undoubted alcoholism and (probably untrue) rumours that he was addicted to opium; Mitchel cruelly commented: “There were [...] two Mangans; one well known to the Muses, the other to the police; one soared through the empyrean and sought the stars – the other lay too often in gutters of Peter Street and Bride Street” (xxxv). While Duffy disputed this, saying “he was never at any period of his life in the hands of the police”, Mangan’s appearance and intemperance clearly counted against him with the nationalist cause; when he applied for membership of the newly-formed Irish Confederation in 1847 Duffy refused: “he could not be of the slightest use to the Confederation; he had none of the qualities that

make a man at home in a political assembly; he was shy, timid, and eccentric, always clothed in a manner which excited curiosity and perhaps ridicule” (“Personal Memories” 288; 293). While Mangan could do the Irish Confederation no good, Duffy argued, he could do himself immeasurable wrong, and needed to be protected against himself: “Self-sacrifice is natural and proper in a revolutionary movement, but one would scarcely think pushing a woman or a child into the fire was a permissible sacrifice” (293). Mangan was not only not accepted as one of the virile young revolutionaries, he was seen as equivalent to a woman or a child, to be kept in safety while the fire of revolution spread.

But the very fact that Mangan put himself forward for membership of the Irish Confederation shows how far his political awareness had developed; the man who in 1832 had joked that “political liberty was not worth a bag of chaff” was attempting to align himself with the future leaders of an uprising. The major turning point was, of course, the start of the Famine in 1845; by February 1846 Mangan was warning Duffy: “we are on the verge of the most tremendous calamity of ancient times or modern” (Mangan: 2002b, 259). If he had averted his gaze from Irish history and politics before, he could not do so now, and he began to make increasingly strident statements about his commitment to Irish liberty. In April 1846, he wrote to Duffy of “my determination to devote myself almost exclusively to the interests of my country in future” (261); the “almost exclusively” harks back to his previous stance of political apathy. But by 1847 he was declaring – in the *Dublin University Magazine* – that: “Slender as our talents are, we have become exceedingly desirous to dedicate them henceforward exclusively to the service of our country” (Mangan: 2002b, 160); his now exclusive dedication, publicly expressed in a conservative unionist publication, says much both about how far Mangan has moved politically, and how

much national feeling had penetrated unionist strongholds as a result of the Famine. By June 1847, Mangan was describing himself as a “patriot”:

I will begin in earnest to labour for my country henceforward, and [...] come weal or woe, life or death, glory or shame, the triumphal chariot or the gallows, I will adhere to the fortunes of my fellow patriots. And I invoke the vengeance of hell upon me if I ever prove false to this promise! (Mangan: 2002b, 269).

But self was to an extent at the bottom of this struggle too. The onset of Famine worsened Mangan’s already precarious social position. As an urban intellectual, he didn’t face the immediate dire straits of the potato-reliant rural peasant, but his alcoholism and his reticence about pressing for payment for his poems and translations, combined with responsibility for his elderly mother and often unemployed brother, left him frequently distressed. In April 1846 he asked Duffy for £5, adding: “Could you see my condition at this moment – could you look into my heart and read my anxiety, my anguish – and above all could you understand the causes of these, you would pity me” (Mangan: 2002b, 261). He told John O’Daly in late 1847: “you will save me from a doom that I dread to contemplate. I shall be obliged to leave my lodgings, and perhaps will die in the streets. [...] If you can get me those ten shillings they will prove my salvation” (271-2). In both cases he was not begging, but asking for advance payment, and his appeals reflect the terrible anticipations he was labouring under.

This apprehension of doom and dread, apparent in the final stanza of “A Voice of Encouragement”, with its omens and portents, its mysterious Envoy (identified in an earlier poem, “The Two Envoys”, as Death) and “pale banquetless guests”, while obviously a response to the horrors Mangan was witnessing in the Famine, was in part

temperamental. As a child he felt “an indescribable feeling of something terrible” lurking in his future, and he was drawn to “the wonderful and terrible in art, nature and society. Descriptions of battles and histories of revolutions; accounts of earthquakes, inundations and tempests [...] possessed a charm for me which I could neither resist nor explain” (Mangan: 2002b, 226, 236). The conjunction of time and temperament led Mangan to become “the Banshee of the famine” (O’Donoghue 234) for the *Nation*, contributing apocalyptic visions of blight and bloodshed. Mangan was one of the first Irish writers to insist on the uniqueness of the Famine. The failure of the potato crop was not unusual; Roy Foster notes there were 14 partial or complete failures 1816-1842 (320). In retrospect, poems like “The Warning Voice” and “The Peal of Another Trumpet” seemed terrifyingly prescient, and Mangan began to enjoy a reputation as a visionary: an editorial note attached to “Ireland’s Resurrection”, published in the *Nation* on 30 October 1847, comments: “the poet, who is a true *Vates*, reads the aspect of coming events, still blank to common men” (888). Perhaps humiliated by being denied membership of the confederation, it is unsurprising that Mangan embraced his prophet status, referring to himself proudly in “Irish National Hymn” in May 1848 as: “*one whom some have called a Seer*” (Mangan: 1999, 49, l. 60).

Many of Mangan’s poems employ visions and dreams to explain the Famine, to urge for action, or to obliquely criticise the government. “A Vision of Connaught in the Thirteenth Century”, published in the *Nation* in July 1846, contrasts the dearth of food in the present with the abundance Ireland enjoyed under Cáthal Mór. Mangan notes: “The Irish and Oriental poets both agree in attributing favorable or unfavorable weather and abundant or deficient harvests to the good or bad qualities of the reigning monarch. What the character of Cahal was will be seen below” (Mangan: 1997, 455);

the character of Queen Victoria, he implies, can equally be seen in the sufferings of her Irish subjects. “The Funerals”, published in the *Irishman* in March 1849, recounts a recurring nightmare that haunts the speaker for ten years:

A vision of dim FUNERALS that passed

In troubled sleep before my sight,

With dirges and deep wails of woe,

That never died upon the blast! (Mangan: 1999, 117, ll. 3-6)

Each funeral hearse is attended by a crowd of skeletons, marching first towards the West, then the South – the areas of Ireland worst affected by the Famine. The Famine is never explicitly referred to, but is the obvious fulfilment of the speaker’s dark anticipations of the coming Apocalypse: “it gives / Dread witness of a JUDGEMENT HOUR!” (ll. 59-60)

Mangan wasn’t alone in his use of visionary and apocalyptic imagery; the Famine answered or inspired millenarian feeling in many observers. Richard D’Alton Williams’s “The Vision: A National Ode” foresees the destruction of the oppressor nation (clearly England), and “A Prophecy” sees the tyrant crushed and dragged to hell (18). Jane Francesca Elgee, the future mother of Oscar Wilde, who wrote for the *Nation* as “Speranza”, predicts in “The Famine Year” that the starving would triumph over their oppressors on the Day of Judgment:

Now is your hour of pleasure – bask ye in the world’s caress;

But our whitening bones against ye will rise as witnesses,

From the cabins and the ditches, in their charred, uncoffin’d masses,

For the Angel of the Trumpet will know them when he passes.

A ghastly, spectral army, before the great God we’ll stand,

And arraign ye as our murderers, the spoilers of our land.

(Elgee: 1864, 7, ll. 43-8)

More widely, this apocalyptic interest reflects a pervasive providentialist reading of the Famine as the wrath of God. For Hugh McNeile, Canon of Chester, it was punishment for Irishmen's perverse clinging to Roman Catholicism and the government's grant to Maynooth seminary: "the famine and pestilence which are at present sweeping thousands of our fellow-subjects into untimely graves, are punishments righteously inflicted by the hand of God for the sins of the nation" (19). Peter Gray has argued that providentialism was a powerful factor in the British government's relief policy: "official conceptions of the famine in Ireland were shaped by established linguistic systems, such as providentialism" (viii). Charles Trevelyan, Chief Secretary to the Treasury, declared of the Famine: "on this, as on many other occasions, Supreme Wisdom has educed permanent good out of transient evil" (89). The *Nation* also saw the blight as providential, suggesting it was a punishment for Irishmen's abdication of nationality, internal wrangling and acquiescence in slavery, but argued that the Famine itself was man-made: "The potato blight is the dispensation of Providence – the famine is the work of a foreign Government" (30 Jan. 1847, 265).

"A Vision: A. D. 1848" is one of the most striking of Mangan's apocalyptic Famine poems. Mangan looks to both past and future, re-reading events since 1839 as predestined and necessary for Ireland's eventual freedom. He is also with this poem staking his meagre political capital in the prospect of a violent uprising. At the end of 1847, John Mitchel had broken with the *Nation* and Young Ireland, and on 12 February 1848 he published the first issue of the *United Irishman*. Mangan's "A Vision: A. D. 1848" appeared on 26 February, in the third issue. He was allying

himself openly with the man the *Times* described as: “the most devoted disciple of bloodshed and blunderbusses” (14 Feb. 1848, 8).

The dreamer of “A Vision: A. D. 1848” is wandering in “the Valley of Dream”, prey to uncontrollable thoughts that sweep “The lone paths of the soul” (Mangan: 1999, 37-40, ll. 2, 7). His situation echoes Dante’s in the opening of *Inferno*:

Half way along the road we have to go,
I found myself obscured in a great forest,
Bewildered, and I knew I had lost the way. (Canto I: 1-3)

This dreamer’s guide is not Virgil, but a mysterious Voice, like the “great voice, as of a trumpet” of Revelation 1:10:

In that spectralest hour,
In that Valley of Gloom,
Fell a Voice on mine ear,
Like a wail from the tomb,
Or that dread cry which Fear
Gives our Angels of Doom,
But of world-waking power. (ll. 11-17)

Mangan identified the “Angels of Doom” in a note as “The Banshees” (Mangan: 1999, 274), and later refers to the Voice as “*the Oracle*”, merging Revelation with classical and Irish mythology. The banshee, from the Irish “bean sídhe”, woman of the fairies, is a portentous figure whose cry of lamentation foretells an approaching death. But this Voice is not merely sounding the alert; it is “Like a wail from the tomb / [...] / But of world-waking power” (ll. 14, 17), implying its role is to rouse not just Irish nationalists, but the whole world in fury at the fate of Ireland. The gender of

the Voice is not disclosed – it is referred to as “it” throughout – but the banshee simile, and the Voice’s role in provoking a response in dreamer and reader, suggest that Mangan may have been modelling his vision poem on the traditional *aisling*, a form particularly prevalent in 18th century Irish political poetry, in which the speaker meets a lovely but sorrowful woman, revealed in the end as the incarnation of Ireland, who laments her woes and looks forward to the return of her rightful husband (Charles Stuart) with the help of brave Irishmen like the speaker. Mangan’s translation of Egan O’Rahilly’s *aisling* “Gile na gile” (“The Brightest of the Bright”), ends:

Oh, my misery, my woe, my sorrow and my anguish,
 My bitter source of dolor is evermore that she
 The Loveliest of the Lovely should thus be left to languish
 Amid a ruffian horde till the Heroes cross the sea.
 (Mangan: 1999, 144, ll. 33-36)

Mangan had used this form already in his most famous poem, “Dark Rosaleen”, a version of the Irish “Roisin Dubh”, which he noted was: “an allegorical address [...] to Ireland” (Mangan: 1997, 450), and he was translating several *aislingí*, including Timothy O’Sullivan’s “Sighile ni Ghadharadh”, “Conor O’Riordan’s Vision”, and several versions of “Moirin ni Chuillionnain”, for John O’Daly’s *The Poets and Poetry of Munster*, which would be published after Mangan’s death. But if “A Vision: A. D. 1848” is an *aisling*, the Voice is not the lovely, vulnerable, erotically charged yet unattainable figure of tradition, but a dominant, omniscient and awe-inspiring invisible presence, reminiscent of the cloaked Envoy of “A Voice of Encouragement” – making the dreamer one of the “pale banquetless guests” trembling with anticipation. While the Envoy’s mission is “unspoken”, the identification of the

Voice as “the Oracle” reflects not just its prophetic status, but also the etymology of “oracle” from *orare*, speak. The poem’s purpose is to make audible the message of Heaven left silent in “A Voice of Encouragement”.

The Oracle explains to the dreamer that the tumultuous events of the last 10 years have been a providential preparation for Irish freedom. The first stage is “The Anointing: 1839-1842”; the Irish had been drowning their sorrows and shame in “the soul-killing cup” (l. 22) until God raised a Man to break the “red bowl” (l. 34) and free their minds. Mangan thus begins his prophecy of Irish freedom with the temperance campaigner Father Theobald Mathew, whose success in persuading more than 5 million people – more than half the population – to sign his total abstinence pledge boosted nationalist leaders’ belief that Irishmen had the self-discipline necessary for a sustained attempt for Repeal of the Union; Daniel O’Connell took the pledge himself in 1840. Mangan did not, at least in 1840, later telling his friend Fr Meehan that he “could not be induced to take the pledge, simply because he doubted his ability to keep it” (qtd. in Shannon-Mangan, 232). He later took, and broke the pledge several times, and was racked by guilt at this, and the disapproval of his nationalist friends. In June 1847 he sent a letter to Duffy, asking him to circulate it among his literary friends, promising: “to live soberly, abstemiously, and regularly in all respects [...] I will constantly advocate the cause of Temperance – the interests of Knowledge – and the duties of Patriotism” (Mangan: 2002b, 269). Temperance and Patriotism were inherently linked for him – after all his lack of temperance was to exclude him from the Confederation. Undoubtedly aware that he could not keep this promise, Duffy did not circulate the letter.

The second phase of Irish freedom is “The Muster: 1842-1845”, O’Connell’s campaign for Repeal and his Monster Meetings. There had been a great deal of

antipathy between O'Connell's Repeal Association and Young Ireland, and Mangan himself had referred to O'Connell as a "shuffling sneaker" in a letter to Duffy in July 1846 (Mangan: 2002b, 265). But O'Connell had died in May 1847; Mangan contemplated writing an elegy on the Liberator for the *Nation*, and called him: "as great a prophet as a politician" (273). O'Connell is canonized in the poem as a saint of the coming struggle.

A more striking revision emerges in the third phase, "The Famine 1845-1848". 1847 had been the worst year of the Famine, and deaths were to continue into the next decade, yet Mangan in February 1848 was asserting that it would end that year. Furthermore, the Famine emerges not as a cataclysmic avoidable tragedy, but as a necessary purgation of "The Weak Ones" before the coming battle:

For that scene must behold
 But stern spirits and bold,
 When the Lord takes the field.
 Therefore Famine first came
 And then Pestilence came,
 And careered through the land
 Like twin giants of Flame –
 And men's hearts were up-dried,
 And a seventh of that Band,
 Who are still to be tried,
 Fell in death, mute, unmanned,
 And with names writ in sand.
 There fell One for each Seven –
 Pray thou peace for their souls

In the homesteads of Heaven! (ll. 68-82)

By this stark account, more than a million people must die, or exchange their hovels for the “homesteads of Heaven”, in order that the strong can remain and prevail; the Famine is not just a providential punishment, but a necessary forerunner of the apocalypse. Mangan may also have been reflecting on a *Nation* leading article published the previous month:

We stand thus: In this accursed Imperial famine we have lost, or will lose a million of our brave people. But we must not lose a whole generation. The seven millions must be saved to avenge the one, and to redeem the island out of bondage and this valley of the shadow of death, in which it now sits sorrowing. (22 Jan. 1848, 56).

The death-knell for the Famine victims mutates at the end of this section into “an omenful peal” (l. 86) of “the Tocsin of War!” (l. 90). The dismissal of Famine victims as “The Weak Ones” may seem callous, but not compared to contemporary providentialist rhetoric, or the pronouncements of later nationalists; the Land League leader Michael Davitt, born in 1846, declared: “as the peasants had chosen to die like sheep rather than retain that food in a fight for life, to live or die like men, their loss to the Irish nation need not occasion many pangs of racial regret” (66). Mangan is prepared to sacrifice “The Weak Ones”, but only because he recognises he is one of them.

The Oracle falls silent in 1848; rather than predicting the future, it has exhumed the past, leaving the dreamer to interpret the omens and signs of the coming apocalypse. “The End”, dated “1848-185*” is ambiguous: it’s certainly not going to happen this year – the end will take place some time in the 1850s; and it’s not exactly clear what the end will be: the freedom of Ireland, heralded by “A noise like fierce

cheers, / Blent with clashings of swords” (ll. 114-5); or the end of the world, “lightnings and thunders, / As ye read of in John’s / Revelation of Wonders” (ll. 102-4)? The dreamer wakes to the sound of “The bell booming Three” (l. 111), and cannot tell.

If Mangan couldn’t prophesy what 1848 would bring for Ireland, he could foresee what would come of his alliance with Mitchel and the *United Irishman*. The February Revolution in France had released Mitchel into militancy; Duffy peevishly commented: “he demeaned himself as if the French Revolution and the new opportunities it furnished were his personal achievements” (*My Life* 261). From now on Mitchel was on a collision course with the government, telling his readers on 4 March: “Above all, let the man amongst you who has no gun, *sell his garment, and buy one*” (*United Irishman* 4 Mar. 1848 56). On 25 March 1848, a letter from Mangan to Mitchel was published in the *United Irishman*:

There is a rumour in circulation, that the government intend to commence a prosecution against you. Insignificant an individual as I am, and unimportant to society as my political opinions may be, I, nevertheless, owe it, not merely to the kindness you have shown me, but to the cause of my country, to assure you that I thoroughly sympathize with your sentiments, that I identify my views of public affairs with yours, and that I am prepared to go all lengths with you and your intrepid friend, Devin Reilly, for the achievement of our national independence. (Mangan: 2002b, 168)

It was a brave, if rather futile act; Mangan was in no condition to “to go all lengths” for national independence; the effects of the Famine, his alcoholism, and haphazard lifestyle had told on his physical and mental health, and he was admitted to St Vincent’s Hospital in May 1848, writing ruefully to McGlashan: “Here it is I am at

last – here, where I shall have ample time for repentance and reflection, for I cannot probably leave for some months, and during all that time I shall be rigorously denied everything in the shape of stimulants.” (Mangan: 2002b, 285). Mitchel was characteristically derogatory about Mangan’s support: “Welcome as the letter was, and not a little touching as coming from him the truth of history compels me to declare that it did not intimidate the British Government much” (xxxviii). Yet he published it, which suggests either respect for Mangan’s opinion, or Mitchel’s complete isolation. On 13 May, Mitchel was arrested, convicted of treason-felony by a packed jury, and on 27 May transported. Young Ireland’s bravado was crushed in an abortive rising in July, ridiculed ever since as “the Battle of Widow McCormick’s cabbage-patch”. Several of Mangan’s fellow poets had their parts to play in the rebellion: Richard D’Alton Williams was tried for treason-felony for his writings in the *Irish Tribune* in 1848; Jane Francesca Elgee, the future mother of Oscar Wilde, edited *The Nation* while Duffy was imprisoned, telling its readers: “One instant to take breath, and then a rising; a rush, a charge from north, south, east, and west upon the English garrison, *and the land is ours*” (Elgee: 1848, 488); Thomas D’Arcy McGee had to flee the country disguised as a priest to avoid capture.

There was never any question of arresting Mangan, who had discharged himself from hospital in June, unable to cope with the doctors’ refusal of stimulants. He was in Richmond Surgical Hospital a few days later, having (probably while drunk) fallen the previous night fifteen feet into the foundations of a house (Shannon-Mangan 388-9). Mangan may not have had a direct role in the failed rising, but it sealed his fate nonetheless. His friends and employers on nationalist newspapers like the *Nation*, *United Irishman* and *Irishman* were transported, in prison or in hiding, and the newspapers themselves were suppressed; without anyone to turn to Mangan went into

speedy decline. He wrote to the Irish scholar James Hardiman on 4 December to ask for a loan of £1: “It is a positive fact that there is not, at this juncture in my affairs, a single soul in Dublin to whom I could make a similar application.” (Mangan: 2002b, 272). John O’Donovan, Mangan’s former colleague on the Ordnance Survey, told Hardiman: “I never saw any man in such a state of destitution [...] His present condition is a scandal to Ireland starving as it is, and a disgrace to literature and to human nature” (qtd. in Shannon-Mangan 397). In January 1849, the state prisoners in Kilmainham gaol, including Mangan’s friend, the poet Joseph Brenan, subscribed £3 10s for Mangan – “as much as they (thanks to their paternal government) can afford” – stating their belief that he was “a man of the highest and purest genius” (qtd. in Shannon-Mangan 402). In May 1849 he contracted cholera; he was discovered by William Wilde, future father of Oscar, in a garret in Bride Street and brought to the Meath Hospital, where he died on 20 June. He was 46. In spite of his sufferings, and the disasters of 1848, his political zeal – or at least his conviction in a providential outcome – remained intact until the last. A few days before he died, his poem “The Famine” appeared in *The Irishman*:

Ye True, ye Noble, who unblenching stand
 Amid the storms and ills of this dark Day,
 Still hold your ground! Yourselves, your Fatherland,
 Have in the Powers above a surest stay!
 Though Famine, Pest, Want, Sickness of the Heart,
 Be now your lot – all these shall soon depart –
 And Heaven be yet at your command! (Mangan: 1999, 138, ll. 36-42)

His transmutation of pain into poetry made him, for James Joyce, “the spiritual focus of his age [...] a romantic, a would-be herald, a prototype for a would-be nation”

(134). He was an unlikely rebel, spurred by time circumstance to take a stand, and while his voice had more in common with “the wail from the tomb” than “world-waking power”, his poetry provides a remarkable reflection of Ireland in 1848, a year of famine and failed rebellion.

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